

The Pope's Letter on Preaching

AN ENCYCLICAL LETTER ON PREACHING THE WORD OF
GOD.

*To the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and
Other Ordinaries in Peace and Communion
with the Apostolic See.*

BENEDICT XV, POPE.

Venerable Brethren Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

IT was the desire of Jesus Christ once He had wrought the Redemption of the human race by His death on the altar of the Cross, to lead men to obey His commands and thus win eternal life. To attain this end He used no other means than the voice of His heralds whose work it was to announce to all mankind what they had to believe and do in order to be saved. "It pleased God, by the foolishness of our preaching, to save them that believed." [I Cor. i:21] (He chose therefore His Apostles, and after infusing into their minds by the power of the Holy Ghost, the gifts in harmony with their high calling, "Go ye into the world," He told them, "and preach the Gospel." [Mark xvi, 15] Their preaching renewed the face of the earth. For if the religion of Christ has withdrawn the minds of men from errors of every kind to the truth, and won their hearts from the degradation of vice to the excellence and beauty of every virtue, assuredly it has done so by means of that very preaching. "Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ." [Rom. x:17]) (Wherefore since by God's good pleasure,

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things are preserved through the same causes by which they were brought into being, it is evident that the preaching of the wisdom taught us by the Christian religion is the means Divinely employed to continue the work of eternal salvation, and that it must with just reason be looked upon as a matter of the greatest and most momentous concern. That preaching, therefore, must form the object of Our special care and attention, particularly so, if in any way, it may have lost perhaps some of its original perfection or its efficacy may have been impaired.

Here then, Venerable Brethren, is a burden added to the other misfortunes of these times, with which, more than any one else, We are tried. For if We look around us and count those who are engaged in preaching the Word of God, We shall find them more numerous perhaps than they have ever been before. If on the other hand We examine the state of public and private morals, the constitutions and laws of nations, We shall find that there is a general disregard and forgetfulness of the supernatural, a gradual falling away from the strict standard of Christian virtue, and that men are slipping back more and more into the shameful practices of paganism.

The causes of these evils are varied and manifold: no one, however, will gainsay the deplorable fact that the ministers of the Word do not apply thereto an adequate remedy. Has the Word of God then ceased to be what it was described by the Apostle, living and effectual and more piercing than any two-edged sword? Has long-continued use blunted the edge of that sword? If that weapon does not everywhere produce its effect, the blame certainly must be laid on those ministers of the Gospel who do not handle it as they should. For no one can

maintain that the Apostles were living in better times than ours, that they found minds more readily disposed towards the Gospel or that they met with less opposition to the law of God.

In view, therefore, of the gravity of the subject, alive to the responsibilities of the apostolic office and warned by them, animated, moreover, by the example of Our two immediate Predecessors, We realize that it must be Our earnest endeavor everywhere to bring back the preaching of the Word of God to the norm and ideal to which it must be directed according to the command of Christ Our Lord, and the laws of the Church.

In the first place, Venerable Brethren, We must look for the causes of our deviations from the right path in this matter. They may be reduced to three: for either the one chosen to preach is not the right person, or his office is not performed with the right intention, or in the right way.

For the duty of preaching, as the Council of Trent teaches, "is the *paramount duty of Bishops*." [Sess., xxiv, De. Ref., c. iv] And the Apostles, whose successors the Bishops are, looked upon it as something peculiarly theirs. St. Paul writes: "For Christ sent us not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel. [I Cor. i:17] And the other Apostles were of the opinion that: "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables." [Acts vi:2] But although preaching is properly the duty of Bishops, nevertheless, since it is impossible that they should always or everywhere be able to discharge it in person, distracted as they are by the many cares which they meet in the government of their churches, they must of necessity comply with this obligation through others. Wherefore it cannot be doubted that

all those who in addition to the Bishops are thus engaged, are employed in the performance of an episcopal duty. Let this then be the first law laid down: that no one on his own responsibility undertake the office of preaching. In order to fulfil that duty everyone must have a lawful mission, and that mission can be conferred by the Bishop alone. "How shall they preach, unless they be sent?" [Rom. x:15] Now the Apostles were sent and sent by Him who is the supreme Pastor and Bishop of our souls [I Pet. ii:25]; so too, were the seventy-two first disciples; nay, St. Paul himself, although constituted by Christ a vessel of election to carry His name, before Gentiles and kings, [Acts ix:15] entered upon his apostolate only after the elders in obedience to the command of the Holy Ghost, "Separate me Saul for the work" [Acts xiii:2], had imposed hands upon him and sent him forth. The same practice was constantly followed in the early days of the Church. For all without exception, both those who distinguished themselves in the priestly order like Origen, and those who later on were raised to the dignity of the episcopate, like Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Augustine and the other more ancient Doctors of the Church, undertook the office of preaching with the sanction and authority of their Bishops.

But now, Venerable Brethren, the custom seems to be far different. Among our sacred orators, there are too many to whom might well be applied that complaint which the Lord makes through the Prophet Jeremias: "I did not send prophets, yet they ran." [Jer. xxiii:21] For the man, who owing to his peculiar bent of mind, or any other cause, should choose to undertake the ministry of the Word, finds easy access to the pulpits of

our churches as to a drill-ground where any one may practise at will. Therefore, Venerable Brethren, it is your duty to see that such a grave abuse should disappear, and since you will have to render to God and to His Church an account of the manner in which you feed your flock, allow no one to creep unbidden into the sheepfold and to feed the sheep of Christ according to his fancy. Therefore let no one henceforth preach in your dioceses except on your summons and with your approval.

Here therefore we would have you pay the greatest heed to whom you commit so sacred a duty. By the decree of the Council of Trent Bishops are permitted to select for this office those only who are "fit," i. e. those who "can exercise the ministry of preaching with profit to souls."

"With profit to souls," well note that the word which expresses the rule does not mean eloquently or with popular applause, but with spiritual fruit. This is the end for which the ministry of the Divine Word is instituted. If now you would have Us define more exactly the qualifications of those who are really to be considered fit, We answer: those in whom you find the signs of a Divine vocation. (Whatever is required for admission to the priesthood, is likewise needed if one is to be considered eligible and fit for the office of preaching.) "Neither doth any man take this honor to himself, but he that is called by God." [Heb. v:4] Such a vocation is easily determined. For Christ Our Lord and Master, when about to ascend into heaven, did not by any means bid His Apostles forthwith go into diverse places and begin their preaching: "But stay you in the city," He said, "till you be indued with power from on high." [Luke xxiv:49] This, therefore, is the sign by which you may know whether any one

is Divinely called to this task: if he "is indued" with power from on high. What this means, Venerable Brethren, may be gathered from what took place in the case of the Apostles as soon as they had received power from on high. For when the Holy Spirit had descended upon them, not to mention here the wonderful gifts with which they were endowed, they were transformed from frail unlettered disciples into learned and perfect men. If a priest therefore has the required knowledge and virtue together with those natural qualifications necessary, without which he would be tempting God, he may be considered as having a true vocation for the office of preaching and there is no reason why he may not be admitted by the Bishop to this ministry. Such is the meaning of the Council of Trent when it decrees that the Bishop is not to permit any to preach unless they are "of approved virtue and learning." (Loc cit.) Wherefore it is the duty of the Bishop long and thoroughly to examine those who are to be entrusted by him with the function of preaching that he may find out the nature and extent of their learning. If any one acts carelessly and negligently in this duty, he clearly offends in a grievous matter, and on him will fall the responsibility of the errors which the untrained preacher may spread or of the scandal and the bad example which the unworthy one may give.

To make your task easier in this matter, Venerable Brethren, We desire that hereafter severe judgment be passed on these two points: on the character, namely, and learning of those who seek to obtain authority to preach, just as is done on the character and learning of those priests who would hear confessions. Whoever, therefore, is found defective in either regard must without any consideration whatever be debarred from

a function for which he is not qualified. Your dignity demands this, since, as We have said, the preachers are your substitutes. The good of Holy Church demands it, for surely if any one should be the "salt of the earth and the light of the world," [Matt. v: 13, 14], it is the man who is engaged in the ministry of the Word. With these rules duly laid down it may seem superfluous to proceed further and explain what should be the purpose and method of the sacred function of preaching. For if we select our sacred orators in accordance with the norm given by Us, they cannot fail to be endowed with the requisite virtues, or set before themselves a worthy purpose or follow the right method in their preaching. Nevertheless it will be serviceable to throw some light on these two points, that thus the reason may become clearer why some fall short of the ideal of a good preacher.

The purpose which sacred orators should keep before their mind in performing their duty may be understood from the fact that they may and ought to say of themselves, as did St. Paul "For Christ therefore we are ambassadors." [II Cor. v:20] If then they are ambassadors of Christ they ought to have the same purpose in discharging their office that Christ had in conferring it on them, nay, the very one that Christ Himself had while living upon earth. For neither the Apostles, nor the preachers who followed the Apostles had a different mission from Christ's: "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you." [John xx:21] Now we know why Christ descended from heaven, for He says expressly: "For this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the truth." [John xviii:37] "I am come that they may have life." [John x:10.]

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Both these purposes therefore must be carried out by the men who devote themselves to the sacred ministry of preaching. They must diffuse the light of truth made known by God, and in those who hear them they must quicken and nourish the supernatural life. In a word, by seeking the salvation of souls they are to promote the glory of God. (As it would, therefore, be wrong to call anyone a doctor who does not practise medicine, or to style anyone a professor of some art who does not teach that art, he who in his preaching neglects to lead men to a fuller knowledge of God and on the way of eternal salvation may be called an idle declaimer, but not a preacher of the Gospel.) And would there were no such declaimers! What motive is it that sways them most? Some are moved by the desire of vain-glory and to satisfy it: "They ponder how they can express high rather than practical thoughts, causing weak minds to admire them, instead of working out the salvation of their hearers. They are ashamed of what is simple and plain, lest they be thought to know nothing else. They are ashamed to give milk to the little ones. [Gillebertus Ab., In Cant. Cantor. Serm. xxvii, 2.] Whereas Jesus Christ proved by the lowliness of his hearers that He was the One whom men were awaiting: "The poor have the Gospel preached to them." [Matt. xi:5] What efforts do such men make to acquire reputation by their sermons from the size and wealth of the cities and splendor of the great churches in which they preach? But since among the truths revealed by God there are some which frighten the weakness of our corrupt nature, and which therefore are not calculated to attract the multitude, they carefully avoid them, and treat themes, in which, the place excepted, there is nothing sacred. Not seldom it happens

that in the very midst of a discourse upon the things of eternity, they turn to politics, particularly if any questions of this kind just then deeply engross the minds of their hearers. They seem to have only one aim, to please their hearers and curry favor with those whom St. Paul describes as "having itching ears." [II Tim. iv:3] Hence that unrestrained and undignified gesture such as may be seen on the stage or on the hustings, that effeminate lowering of the voice or those tragic outbursts; that diction peculiar to journalism; those frequent allusions to profane and non-Catholic literature, but not to the Sacred Scriptures or the Holy Fathers; finally that volubility of utterance often affected by them, wherewith they strike the ears and gain their hearers' admiration, but give them no lesson to carry home. How sadly are those preachers deceived! Granted that they receive the applause of the uneducated, which they seek with such great labor, and not without sacrilege, is it really worth while when we consider that they are condemned by every prudent man, and, what is worse, have reason to fear the stern judgment of Christ?

Not all however who depart from the right rule and norm, Venerable Brethren, are seeking for nothing but popular applause in their preaching. Frequently the preachers who avail themselves of these devices do so to attain some other and even less honorable object. Forgetting the saying of Gregory: "The priest does not preach that he may eat, but should eat that he may preach," [In I Regum, lib. iii], there are not a few who, because they think that they are unsuited for other labors by which they might be decently supported, take to preaching, not that they may worthily exercise the sacred ministry, but to make money. We therefore see them devoting all their

attention not indeed to finding where greater fruit for souls may be hoped for, but where preaching reaps a more lucrative return.

Now since nothing except harm and discredit can be expected for the Church from such as these, Venerable Brethren, you must exercise the greatest care, so that, if you detect any one for his own glory or for gain, abusing the office of preaching, you should at once remove him from that function. For the man who does not scruple to defile so holy an office by such an unworthy perversion of its end, surely will not hesitate to descend to any indignity, and will bring the stain of ignominy not merely upon himself, but upon the sacred office also which he so unworthily administers.

The same severity is to be shown towards those who fail to preach properly because they have neglected the acquisition of whatever is necessary for performing this function becomingly. What these conditions are We may learn from the example of him whom the Church has called "the Preacher of truth," the Apostle St. Paul. Would that by God's mercy We might have many more preachers like him!

(The first lesson, therefore, that We learn from St. Paul is how well prepared and equipped he was for preaching.) But We do not refer now to the learned studies he had assiduously pursued under Gamaliel. For the knowledge poured into his soul by revelation dimmed and nearly eclipsed the knowledge he had acquired by his own efforts, though that the latter knowledge was of no little value to him is clear from his Epistles. (Learning, as We have said, is absolutely necessary for the preacher, for if he is without the light of learning he easily falls into error, since "Ignorance is the mother of all errors,"

as the Fourth Lateran Council so truthfully observes. We would not be understood, however, to mean every sort of knowledge, but only that which it becomes a priest to possess, that is to say, the knowledge, to phrase it briefly, which consists of a knowledge of self, of God and his duties. For self-knowledge, We maintain, will lead a priest to renounce his own advantage. The knowledge of God will lead him to make everyone else know and love God, and the knowledge of his office will lead him to discharge his own duties and to teach others to do theirs. If he lacks these three kinds of knowledge, whatever other learning he has, will only puff him up, and will be useless.

Let us now consider what the Apostles spiritual preparation for preaching was. The three qualities of his equipment most worthy of note are these: First of all he was a man who always fully conformed himself to God's will. No sooner was he smitten, when on the road to Damascus, by the power of the Lord Jesus than he uttered that cry so worthy of an apostle: "Lord what wilt thou have me to do?" [Acts ix:6] For then and there as ever afterwards, for Christ's sake he was indifferent to toil or rest, to poverty or wealth, to praise or contempt, to life or death. There can be no doubt that he made such progress in the apostolate because he conformed with such perfect submission to the will of God. Wherefore like St. Paul, every preacher devoted to the salvation of souls should be first of all so zealous for God's service as to feel no concern about who his hearers are to be, what success he will have, or what fruits he is to reap. He should have an eye not to his own advantage but only to God's glory.

But such zeal for God's service as that demands a

soul so prepared for hardships that it will not avoid labor or trouble of any kind, and that is the second quality that was conspicuous in St. Paul. For when the Lord had said to him: "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake," [Acts ix:16] he so eagerly embraced suffering that he could write: "I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulations." [II Cor. vii:4] Indeed if this patient endurance of hardships is conspicuous in a preacher, it effaces whatever human weakness there is in him and wins from God the grace to produce fruit and gains for his apostolate, to a degree beyond belief, the favor of Christian people. On the other hand but little success in moving hearts is attained by those who, wherever they go, immoderately desire the comforts of life, and provided they deliver their sermons, put their hand to scarcely any other work of the sacred ministry, and the result is that they appear to be seeking their own ease rather than the good of souls.

In the third place the "spirit of prayer," as it is called, is necessary, the Apostle tells us, for the preacher. No sooner was he, himself called to the apostolate than he began his supplications to God. "For behold he prayeth." [Acts ix:11] For it is not by pouring forth a copious stream of words, not by using subtle arguments, not by delivering violent harangues, that the salvation of souls is effected. The preacher who is content with those means is nothing but "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." [I Cor. xiii:1] What gives a man's words life and vigor and makes them promote wonderfully the salvation of souls is Divine grace: "God gave the increase." [I Cor. iii:6] But the grace of God is not gained by study and practice: it is won by prayer. Therefore he who is little given to prayer or neglects it alto-

gether, vainly spends his time and labor in preaching, for in God's sight his sermons profit neither himself nor those who hear him.

To express briefly, therefore, what We have just said, let Us quote these words of St. Peter Damian: "For the preacher two things are especially necessary: namely that his words should be rich in ghostly wisdom, and that his life should be conspicuous for the luster of its piety. But if a priest is unequal to being both holy in life and rich in learning, holiness of life is, without question, to be preferred to mere learning. For the example of a saintly life is more powerful than eloquence and a studied delivery. . . . The priest who discharges the office of preaching should cause showers of heavenly wisdom to fall from his lips, and from his life rays of piety to shine out, just as the angel in telling the shepherds of Our Lord's birth, both shone with great splendor and expressed in words the tidings he had come to announce." [Epp. Lib. i, Ep. i ad Cinthium Urbis Præf.]

However, to return to St. Paul, if we ask on what subjects he was wont to discourse when he preached, he condenses them all in these words: "For I judged not myself to know anything among you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified." [I Cor. ii:2] To make men know Jesus Christ better and better, and to make that knowledge have a bearing, moreover, not only on their faith, but on their lives as well, was the object of that apostolic man's every endeavor. This was the one object of every throb of his apostolic heart. Therefore all Christ's doctrines and commands, even the sterner ones, were so proclaimed by St. Paul that he did not restrict, gloss over or tone down what Christ taught regarding humility, self-denial, chastity, contempt of the world, obedience, forgiveness of

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enemies, and the like, nor was he afraid to tell his hearers that they had to make a choice between the service of God and the service of Belial, for they could not serve both, that when they leave this world, a dread judgment awaits them; that they cannot bargain with God; they may hope for life everlasting if they keep His entire law, but if they neglect their duty and indulge their passions, they will have nothing to expect but eternal fire. For our "Preacher of truth" never imagined that he should avoid such subjects, because, owing to the corruption of the age, they appeared too stern to his hearers. Therefore it is clear how unworthy of commendation are those preachers who are afraid to touch upon certain points of Christian doctrine lest they should give their hearers offense. Does a physician prescribe useless remedies to his patient, merely because the sick man rejects effective ones? The test of the orator's power and skill is his success in making his hearers accept the stern truth he is preaching. How did the Apostle unfold the subjects of which he treated? "Not in the persuasive words of human wisdom." [I Cor. ii:4] It is perfectly plain, Venerable Brethren, how important for everybody it is that they should thoroughly realize this, since we see that not a few of our sacred preachers overlook in their sermons the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and the arguments based on sacred theology, and for the most part, make their appeals only to reason. Unquestionably that is wrong, for in the supernatural order, merely human resources are of no help whatever. But the objection may be urged: The people have no confidence in the preacher who insists on Divinely revealed truths. Is that true? With non-Catholics, granted. However, when the Greeks sought the wisdom, forsooth,

of this world, the Apostle, nevertheless, preached to them Christ crucified. If we direct our attention, however, to Catholic people, even those men among them who are unfriendly to us, generally keep in their hearts the roots of faith. Their intellects are blinded because their souls are corrupted. Lastly, what end did St. Paul have in his preaching? Not to please men, but Christ. "If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." [Gal. i:10] As his heart was on fire with the love of Christ, he sought for nothing save the glory of Christ. O that all who are engaged in the ministry of the Word were true lovers of Jesus Christ. Would that all could repeat these words of St. Paul: "For whom [Jesus Christ] I have suffered the loss of all things," [Phil. iii:8] and "To me to live is Christ." [Phil. i:21] Only those who glow with love themselves know how to set on fire the hearts of others. Wherefore St. Bernard gives a preacher this counsel: "If you are wise, be a reservoir, not a conduit, be full yourself of what you preach and do not think it enough to pour it out for others." [In Cant. Serm. 18] The Doctor then adds: "Today we have in the Church a profusion of conduits, but how few are the reservoirs!"

We must strive with all our might and main, Venerable Brethren, to prevent such a state of things from occurring in the future. For it is your duty, by rejecting the unfit and by encouraging, training and guiding the fit, to bring it to pass that there should now be no lack of preachers who are men after God's own heart.

Through the intercession, therefore, of the most Holy Virgin, the August Mother of the Incarnate Word Himself, and the Queen of the Apostles, may Jesus Christ the merciful and everlasting Shepherd of souls vouchsafe

to look down with favor on His flock, fill the clergy with the apostolic spirit, and grant that there may be many who will strive eagerly "to present themselves approved unto God, workmen that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." [II Tim. ii:15]

As a pledge of heavenly favors and in testimony of Our good-will, We lovingly impart the Apostolic Benediction to you, Venerable Brethren, and to your clergy and people.

Given at St. Peter's, Rome, on the fifteenth day of June, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the year nineteen hundred and seventeen, in the third of Our Pontificate.